



Isolated Together: Pairs of Primary Schools Duplicating Provision

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Isolated Together: Pairs of Primary Schools Duplicating Provision.

01. The Purpose

This paper will examine duplication of primary school provision in Northern Ireland. This duplication occurs where a Controlled school and a Maintained school are located close to each other, often in small settlements. However, while located close to each other, one or both may be too small to be sustainable. Were these schools to find arrangements to remove duplication and to become more sustainable they would be more likely to avoid closures, to the benefit of all sides of the local communities.

02. Background

2.1 Divided Education

Educational division in Northern Ireland stems from a period following the establishment of National schools in Ireland from 1812. Initially integrated, most of these schools gradually became reflective of the majority population of the areas in which they were located.¹ When the Northern Ireland state was established in 1921, the first Education Minister attempted to re-establish an integrated education system, but pressure from both Protestant and Catholic churches led to the policy being abandoned in favour of a divided system. The system remains fundamentally divided, so much so that it is widely described as 'segregated'.

Catholic Maintained and Controlled schools make up over 9 in 10 of all primary schools. While the pupil intake into both types is theoretically non-denominational, Catholic Maintained schools generally have a Catholic, Nationalist, Irish ethos and Controlled schools a Protestant, Unionist, British one. They also differ in terms of ownership, funding arrangements, governance and employment.

The 363 Catholic Maintained primaries and the 365 Controlled primaries (2018-19 figures) are spread across Northern Ireland, although there may be an absence of one or other in areas where the population is largely drawn from one community. There are relatively few Controlled primaries in rural south Armagh, for instance, and relatively few Maintained primaries among the farming communities of north Antrim. In most of Northern Ireland, rural populations appear to be geographically mixed. However, this can be deceptive. While there are no Peace Lines beyond the larger settlements, even small villages may be divided into areas perceived as 'Protestant' or 'Catholic'. Some research reports one ATM machine in a small village being used by Catholics and another by Protestants.² Duplication of services in rural areas has been well documented since the early 1970s. Having small settlements or rural areas with two primary schools, each serving their own community, is not uncommon in Northern Ireland.

¹ Gardner, J. (2016) Education in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday Agreement: Kabuki Theatre Meets Danse Macabre. *Oxford Review of Education* 42 (3)

² Hamilton, J., Hansson, U., Bell, J., and Toucas, S. (2008) *Segregated Lives: Social Division, Sectarianism and Everyday Life in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Institute of Conflict Research

2.2 Small Schools

Northern Ireland has relatively large areas with low population density, which have traditionally been served by small local schools. The minimum numbers of pupils required for sustainable operation of primary schools has been determined by the Bain Report as 105 in rural and 140 in urban areas. In 2017-18, 274 of the 817 primary schools in Northern Ireland (34%) were below those sustainability thresholds.³ This, combined with a divided system of education, makes rationalisation of educational provision challenging but urgent.

The impact of small schools has been the subject of much research, including their influence on academic outcomes. Concerns have long been expressed about small schools not providing a wide enough curriculum and lacking staff with specialist skills.⁴ This is a particular challenge in very small schools in which teachers feel isolated, having fewer opportunities to exchange teaching ideas with other teachers.⁵ In these circumstances, staff have to take on multiple roles, especially as teaching principals. Small schools often take pupils from a tightly defined locality, which reduces social mixing and exposure to diversity.⁶ Additionally, such schools often have classes of pupils of different ages being taught together in composite classes and some view such classes as “inferior to more homogeneous age grouping”.⁷

On the other hand, some sources highlight the advantages of small schools. One overview of 57 studies concluded that “smaller schools are generally better for most purposes”.⁸ Those studies which find benefits in smaller schools often point to better communication in such schools with small staff teams and stronger links to the local community.⁹ Others suggest that small schools are places where innovative teaching and learning is easier to implement in open and safe environments where teachers feel that they can collaborate more. While often cited as challenges, composite classes can offer advantages for learners with peer tutoring and reciprocal learning in mixed classrooms; indeed, some educationalists actually criticise the grouping of children into age-based classes.¹⁰ Small rural schools also have functions outside education as the “heart of the villages ...involving the entire community”.¹¹

The view that smaller schools are more expensive to run and that larger schools would benefit from economies of scale¹² has often led to school consolidation, for example in the United States from the 1930s. That process eliminated 70% of US schools and increased average enrolments from 100 to 440 over 40 years. However, other research suggests that “small schools are more efficient or cost-effective”.¹³ Generally, absorbing small schools into larger units results in increased journey times for many children who now have to attend the larger school, a particularly sensitive issue for small children.

03. This Study

3.1 GIS Analysis

This study uses GIS analysis of 2018/19 education data (school location: NINIS¹⁴; management type: DENI) to precisely identify and quantify pairs of schools which are very close to one another but some distance from schools of the same management type.

All primary schools were mapped and their locations analysed to identify pairs of schools with the criteria of (a) located less than one mile apart and (b) each school more than three miles by road from other schools of the same management type. This resulted in 32 pairs of schools, all of them in rural areas. This means that across Northern Ireland there are 32 instances of pairs of schools offering primary-aged education to two different communities, isolated by at least three miles by road from a similar Maintained or Controlled school, but often only yards apart.

³ Education Authority (2018) *Primary Schools Annual Area Profile September 2018*

⁴ Central Advisory Council for Education (1967) *Children and their Primary Schools. The Plowden Report*. London: HMSO

⁵ Smit, R., Hyry-Belhammer, E.K. and Raggl, A. (2015) Teaching and learning in small, rural schools in four European countries: Introduction and synthesis of mixed-/multi-age approaches. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 74

⁶ Smith, D., & DeYoung, A. (1988). Big school vs. small school: conceptual, empirical, and political perspectives on the re-emerging debate. *Journal of Rural & Small Schools*, 2(2)

⁷ Åberg-Bengtsson, L. (2009) The smaller the better? A review of research on small rural schools in Sweden. *International Journal of Educational Research* 48

⁸ Leithwood, K. and Jantzi, D. (2009) A review of empirical evidence about school size effects: A policy perspective. *Review of educational research*, 79(1)

⁹ Hopkins, D. and Ellis, P.D. (1991) The effective small primary school: Some significant factors. *School Organization*, 11(1)

¹⁰ See Raggl, A. (2015) Teaching and learning in small rural primary schools in Austria and Switzerland—Opportunities and challenges from teachers' and students' perspectives. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 74

¹¹ Autti, O. and Hyry-Belhammer, E.K. (2014) School Closures in Rural Finnish Communities. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 29(1)

¹² Gottfredson, D. C., & DiPietro, S. M. (2011). School size, social capacity, and student victimization. *Sociology of Education*, 84

¹³ Leithwood and Jantzi (2009):484

¹⁴ Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service (n.d.) <https://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/>;

Table 1: Isolated pairs of primary schools (all 2018-19 data)

Location of schools (counties)	School enrolment (full-time equivalent)		% Catholic pupils		Teacher numbers full-time equivalent (pupil/teacher ratios)	
	Maintained primary	Controlled primary	Maintained primary	Controlled primary	Maintained primary	Controlled primary
Antrim	87	89	100	*	4.4 (19.8)	3.8 (23.4)
	58	89	#	*	3.0 (19.3)	4.8 (18.6)
	239	81	98	*	9.8 (24.4)	4.4 (18.4)
Armagh	33	88	100	0	2.4 (13.9)	4.4 (20.0)
Down	77	722	94	3	5.8 (13.3)	30.0 (24.1)
	127	120	100	*	6.0 (21.2)	5.4 (22.2)
	46	429.5	100	11	3.0 (15.3)	16.2 (26.6)
Derry / Londonderry	203	51	#	0	9.2 (22.0)	3.0 (17.0)
	250	158	96	4	10.8 (23.1)	6.8 (23.2)
	415	68	98	65	18.0 (23.1)	3.4 (20.0)
	445	175	94	10	18.0 (24.7)	8.4 (20.8)
	174	89	#	*	8.6 (20.2)	4.4 (20.2)
	263	105	96	0	11.5 (22.8)	4.6 (23.0)
	160	264	#	6	8.0 (20.0)	12.2 (21.6)
	79	243	100	2	4.4 (18.0)	9.6 (25.5)
	70	193	#	*	3.0 (23.3)	8.6 (22.5)
Fermanagh	92	27	#	*	5.4 (17)	2.2 (12.3)
	53	73	#	*	3.0 (17.7)	3.6 (20.3)
	225	168	95	17	9.4 (23.9)	7.6 (22.1)
	129	68	95	0	6.6 (19.6)	4.0 (17.2)
	73	201	#	*	4.0 (18.3)	8.5 (23.7)
	172	41	#	0	8.0 (21.5)	3.0 (13.7)
	113	46	100	0	5.2 (21.7)	3.6 (12.8)
	136	102	#	*	6.0 (22.7)	5.0 (20.4)
Tyrone	92	145	94	0	5.0 (18.4)	6.4 (22.7)
	118	35	100	0	4.8 (24.5)	2.3 (15.2)
	34	110	100	*	2.4 (14.2)	6.6 (16.7)
	28	187	#	9	3.4 (8.2)	8.0 (23.4)
	82	55	#	*	4.6 (17.8)	3.0 (18.3)
	135	21	#	*	5.5 (24.6)	2.2 (9.6)
	119	63	#	0	6.0 (19.8)	3.0 (21.0)
	178	40	100	0	8.0 (22.3)	2.4 (16.7)

Source: DENI (2018) Teacher Workforce Statistics 2018/19

* Less than 5 cases where data is considered sensitive

Figures suppressed under rules of disclosure (although 2016-17 data shows figures in these cells averaging 97.3%)

Shaded cells are unsustainable in terms of enrolment

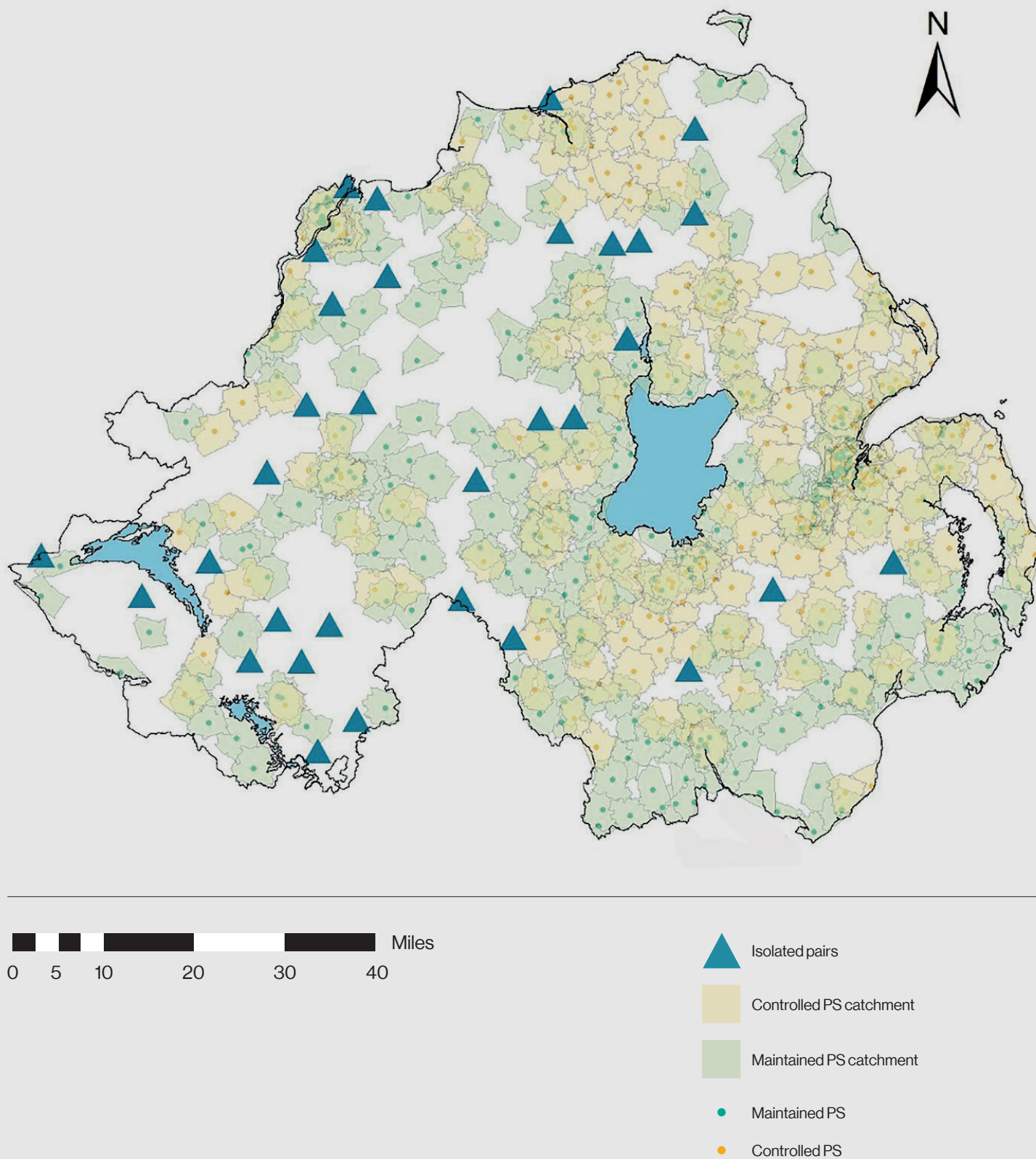
Pairs of unsustainable schools are highlighted with bold type

Table 1 provides some details of the 32 pairs. Despite being an average of just 670 yards apart, it is clear that these schools are serving the needs of two different communities as, except for four instances, the proportion of Catholics in the Controlled schools is less than 10%,¹⁵ while Maintained primaries have 98% Catholic enrolment, on average. In six cases the paired primary schools are both sustainable (although some are barely so), but in 20 cases one of the pair is not sustainable (8 Maintained and 12 Controlled). Additionally, there are six cases where neither school in the pairing is sustainable.

¹⁵ There are two anomalous Controlled primaries with more than 15% Catholic learners, each in locations close to the border with the Republic of Ireland. This can be a consequence of selective population migration from these areas.

The locations of the 32 isolated pairs of primary schools are shown on Map 1. Most are in the south and west of Northern Ireland. Counties Antrim and Down have three each, and County Armagh just one. Most of the pairs are in Tyrone, Derry/Londonderry and Fermanagh. The map also shows all other Maintained and Controlled primary schools and their three-mile catchment areas.

Map 1:
Isolated pairs of primary schools three miles or more from similar schools



3.2 Estimating the Cost of Duplication

In 2019, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee found “...an acknowledgement that there was a large amount of wasted capacity in the [education] system”.¹⁶ Giving evidence to the committee, Sir Robert Salisbury contrasted duplicated provision in his local town in Northern Ireland with a similarly sized town in England, and concluded “...if you replicate that across the whole of Northern Ireland, you have your funding crisis in one view”.

Each of the 32 pairs of schools identified here requires sufficient teachers to deliver the curriculum to 4 to 11-year olds. Even in very small schools, and 10 of these schools have fewer than 50 pupils, there must still be a principal with responsibility for running the school. There is also duplication of teaching with, in 94% of the unsustainable schools on Table 1, pupil-teacher ratios higher than the Northern Ireland average for primary schools of 22.3 in 2018-19. In some cases, ratios are as high as 1 teacher for 8 pupils. A classroom in a school just a few hundred yards away may well have a similar ratio.

There is also duplication in ancillary staff. Sometimes on-site catering is provided at each school which requires a cook and other staff. Schools invariably have a number of classroom assistants, a secretary, a building supervisor/caretaker and a range of other staff. School websites¹⁷ indicate an average of more than 11 ancillary staff, including 6 classroom assistants, in each of these 64 schools.

While many of these staff may be part-time, particularly in the case of the smaller schools, duplication is still inevitable. Of course, small schools require these staff to service the curriculum and to support the children in myriad ways, but these particular schools are close neighbours with other schools providing identical services.

The Department of Education in Northern Ireland recognises the additional cost of our divided system, in terms of a larger number of individual schools needed to support the range of school management types. This may be one of the reasons for the need for a Small Schools' Support factor in the Common Funding Formula Aggregated Schools Budget. This Common Funding Scheme is calculated using a wide range of social and other measures, such as age weightings for pupils, social deprivation funding and provision for particular groups such as Travellers or newcomer children. Small Schools Support provides a lump sum equivalent to an additional teacher salary to schools with enrolments up to 100 pupils, tapering to zero for a school of 300 pupils.¹⁸

Table 2 shows the average annual funding¹⁹ per pupil for the isolated pair of schools with the smallest combined enrolment (199 pupils), that for the pair of middle-sized schools (with a combined enrolment of 237 pupils), and also for the largest enrolment in the pairs (a combined enrolment of 779 pupils). Each of these is compared to the average funding per pupil in a single primary school of the same size as the combined size of the isolated pairs. For example, the funding per pupil for the smallest combined enrolment of 119 is compared to the average of five other individual primary schools in Northern Ireland which have, in this case exactly, the same enrolment of 119 pupils.

The average funding per pupil in the smallest isolated pair, when combined, is £4,250 per pupil, compared to just £3,163 per pupil in single schools of a comparable size, a difference of over 35%. A pair of schools close to the middle enrolment size in the 32 isolated pairs have a combined enrolment of 237. They too get more funding per pupil than individual schools of a comparable size, although the difference is now only 10%. In the pair of isolated schools with the largest enrolment (799 pupils), there is very little difference in the funding per pupil.

Much of the difference in funding can be attributed to the tapering of the Small Schools' Support Factor in larger schools. This might be thought to be an argument for retaining the largest pairs of schools as separate schools – clearly the funding per pupil is around the same as it would be in a single school of the same size. However, there remains duplication of provision in the isolated pairs, whether from having two principals or two sets of catering and other ancillary staff.

Notes

¹⁶ Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (July 2019) Ninth Report of Session 2017/19, *Education Funding in Northern Ireland*, HC 1497 (London: The Stationery Office).

¹⁷ This is not an unproblematic source. School websites may not be up-to-date, or reliable for this type of information. Additionally, larger schools invariably have websites while very small schools sometimes do not.

¹⁸ DENI (2018) *Common Funding Scheme 2018-19*

¹⁹ Common Funding Formula Budgets for Schools 2018-19 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/common-funding-formula-budgets-schools-2018-19>

This has a similar impact whatever the size of the schools. A proportion of the overall funding of the schools in the isolated pairs has to be spent sustaining that duplication and so the overall money available for supporting teaching and learning within those schools will be reduced. The notional £2,671 per pupil per year in the largest of the pairs of schools has to support the duplication of provision, while more of the £2,714 in the single school of the same size can be spent on the children. In smaller schools “...it is not possible to specialise in a subject and subject specific exchanges within a school are limited”.²⁰ A school with a high enrolment may be able to provide a number of specialist roles such as Special Needs Co-ordinators and extensive teaching support staff. Even were smaller schools able to provide these, they are likely to be less well trained and resourced, even with exactly the same formula funding per pupil. If that is the case, the apparent similarity in funding per pupil in larger duplicate schools and unitary schools found in this sample might suggest career opportunities for staff and higher staff salaries in the single schools, while isolated pairs of schools with a similar combined enrolment will require some of their funding to service duplication, rather than career opportunities for staff. More research is required to investigate this.

Overall, the 32 pairs of schools identified here received an additional £2.3M each year, compared to the average cost to support the same pupils in combined schools in each location. The Small Schools’ Support factor, calculated as 3.82% of the overall budget to schools across Northern Ireland,²¹ cost more than £44 million in 2018-19.

Table 2: Formula funding for primary schools: pairs and individual schools of comparable enrolments (2018-19)

	Average funding per pupil per year (£)	% difference (pairs compared to individual school)
Lowest enrolment in the isolated pairs of schools (119 pupils when combined)	4,290	+35.6
Average of the five primary schools across NI with the same enrolment (119)	3,163	
Pupil numbers in the mid-enrolment isolated pair of schools (237 pupils when combined)	3,250	+10.4
Average of the five primary schools across NI with similar enrolment (236.8)	2,945	
Highest enrolment in the isolated pairs of schools (799 pupils when combined)	2,671	+1.6
Average of the five primary schools across NI with similar enrolment (799.2)	2,714	

²⁰ Smit, Hyry-Belhammer and Raggl (2015) p.99

²¹ Education Authority (2017) *Providing Pathways: Strategic Area Plan for School Provision 2017-2020*

04 Discussion of Outcomes

Rationalisation of provision of small primary schools in Northern Ireland has been ongoing for some time. Area planning does not just take enrolment numbers into account, but also examines the school's financial situation, enrolment trends, school leadership and management, its location and the potential impact on the community should a school close. The quality of the educational experience is said to be key and, even if in a sound financial position, a school would not be "...considered viable if the quality and breadth of the education it provides is less than satisfactory".²²

The 'Strategic Area Plan for School Provision 2017-2020'²³ is explicit about the need for larger schools. When it says that the "Area Plan ... aims to ensure that all pupils have access to a broad and balanced curriculum that meets their needs in sustainable schools ... in particular the need to raise standards and close the attainment gap through a network of sustainable schools",²⁴ there is a strong suggestion that smaller schools are not believed to be able to offer a broad and balanced curriculum, and that their attainment may be lower than that of larger schools.

Despite the research which highlights some advantages of composite classes, the Department of Education is clear that "Primary schools with fewer than seven classes often encounter problems"²⁵ and that there are additional challenges in meeting educational requirements of children when there are composite classes.

Collaboration between schools in Shared Education is also encouraged, although this does not address duplication, and its impact on systemic change might be negligible.²⁶

The literature has indicated that small rural schools can actually be quite efficient, and that educational outcomes from such schools can be excellent. The argument here is not that small schools should necessarily close, but that more effective local arrangements can be made, particularly in situations where schools are located very close to each other and are duplicating what they do.

There is potential for small communities to retain a single, integrated school rather than risk closure of two unsustainable schools currently catering separately to each community. While reaching sustainable enrolment, often such schools would still be small enough to offer the advantages that small schools are thought to provide, while being of a scale which allows some of the benefits of larger schools.

Area Planning authorities for schools in both the Maintained and Controlled sectors will be very familiar with the 64 schools in these 32 pairs, and with the communities that they serve. It is important to recognise that this is not just about funding and efficiency savings. Many of these schools are located within divided communities emerging from recent conflict. There may be a strong desire for choice in education, including faith-based provision. However, there is growing evidence that long-divided communities can collaborate²⁷ and decide on future educational provision together. Sometimes this may result in more young people being educated in the same building with a common uniform and staff group, and with a shared purpose. That outcome is likely to contribute to social cohesion. Additionally, such community engagement will make it more likely that currently unsustainable duplicated educational services can become sustainable and provide a community facility for all of the people in those communities.

Notes

²² DENI (2009) *Schools for the Future: A Policy for Sustainable Schools*. Department of Education, Bangor

²³ Education Authority, (2017)

²⁴ Education Authority, (2017):6

²⁵ DENI (2009):22

²⁶ Roulston, S. and Hansson, U. (2019) Kicking the can down the road? Educational solutions to the challenges of divided societies: a Northern Ireland case study.

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²⁷ See Bates, J. and O'Connor Bones, U. (2018) *A Community Conversation Toolkit*, UNESCO Centre, School of Education, Ulster University



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